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(54) **SWITCHING BETWEEN DEDICATED FUNCTION HARDWARE AND USE OF A SOFTWARE ROUTINE TO GENERATE RESULT DATA**

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(58) **Field of Classification Search**
None

See application file for complete search history.

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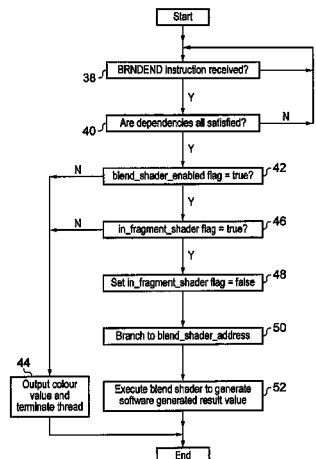
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(57) **ABSTRACT**

An apparatus for processing data **2** is provided including processing circuitry **24** controlled by an instruction decoder **20** in response to a stream of program instructions. There is also provided dedicated function hardware **12** configured to receive output data from the processing circuitry and to perform a dedicated processing operation. The instruction decoder **20** is responsive to an end instruction **54** and a software processing flag (blend_shade_enabled) to control the processing circuitry to end a current software routine, to generate output data and in dependence upon the software processing flag either trigger processing of the output data by the dedicated function hardware or trigger the processing circuitry to perform a further software routine upon the output data to generate software generated result data instead of hardware generated result data as generated by the dedicated hardware circuitry.

13 Claims, 4 Drawing Sheets



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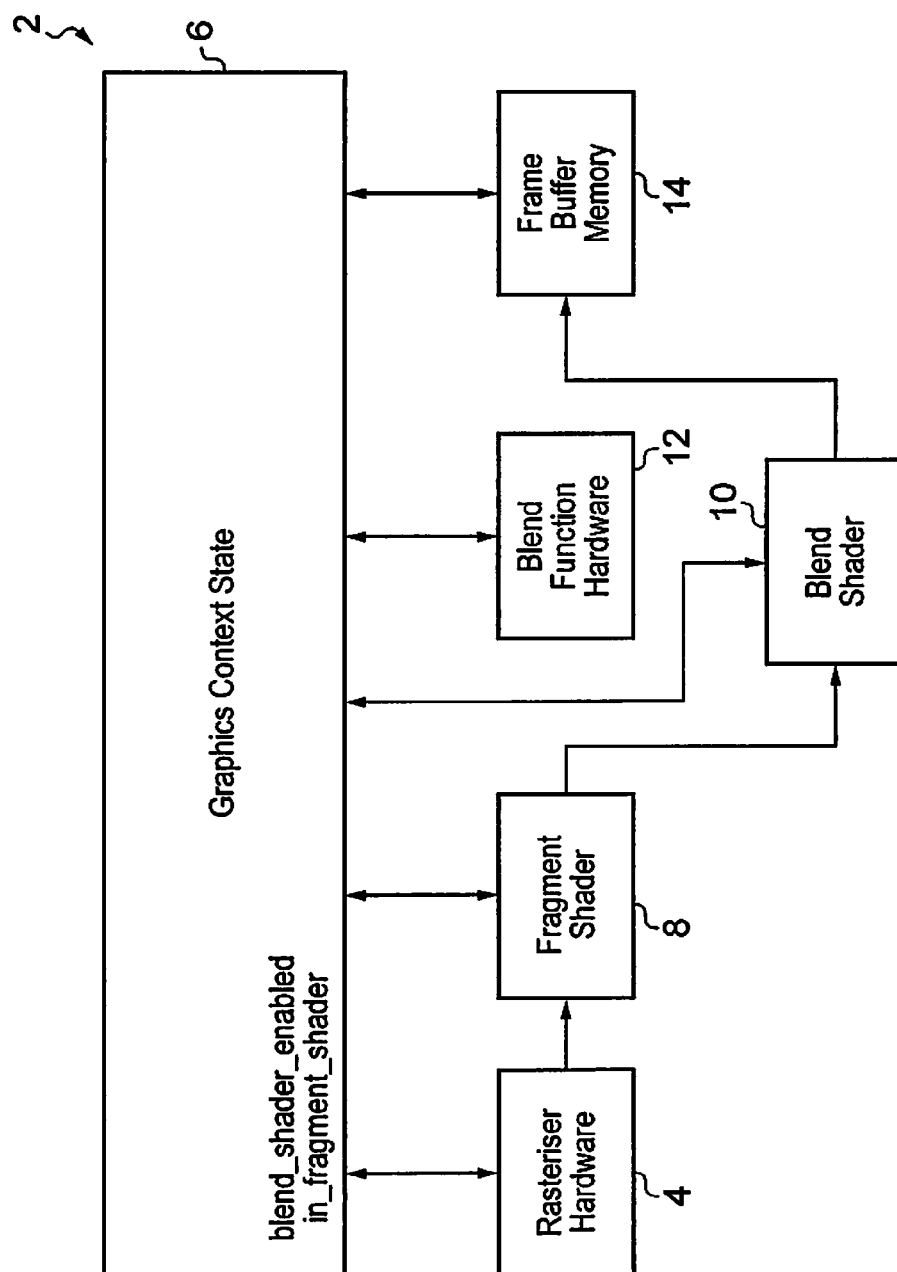


FIG. 1

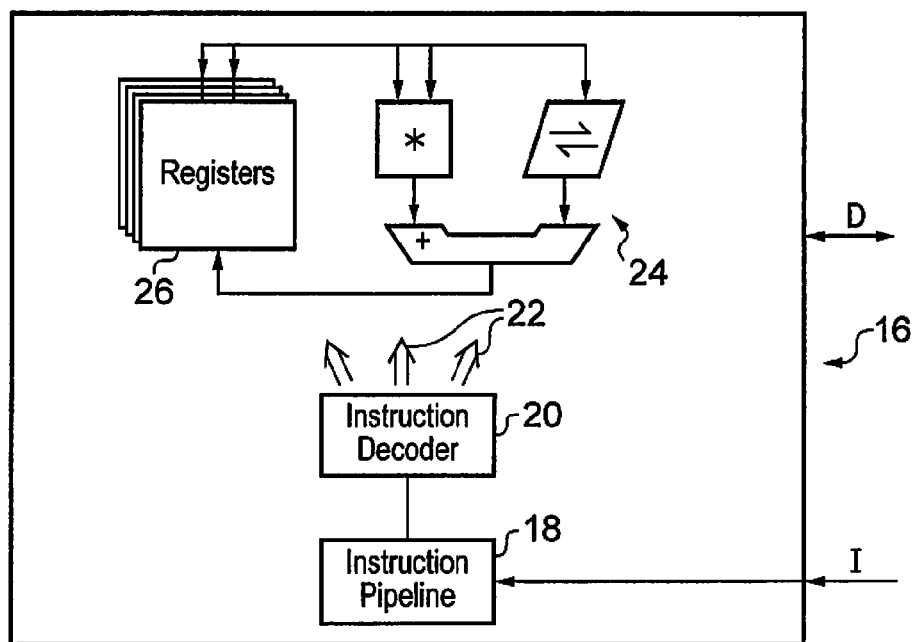


FIG. 2

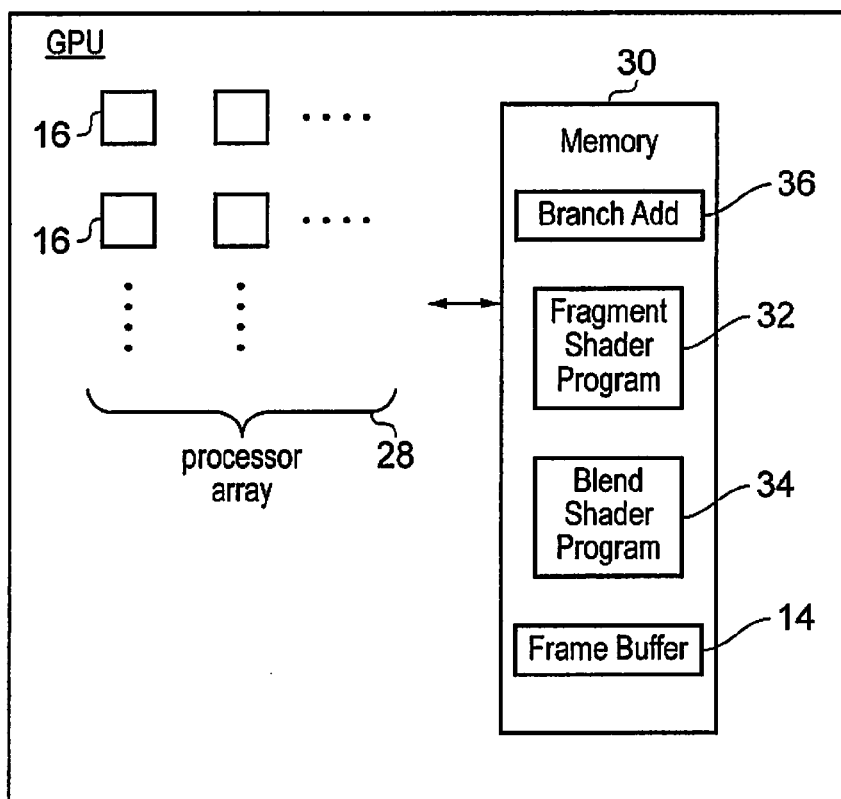


FIG. 3

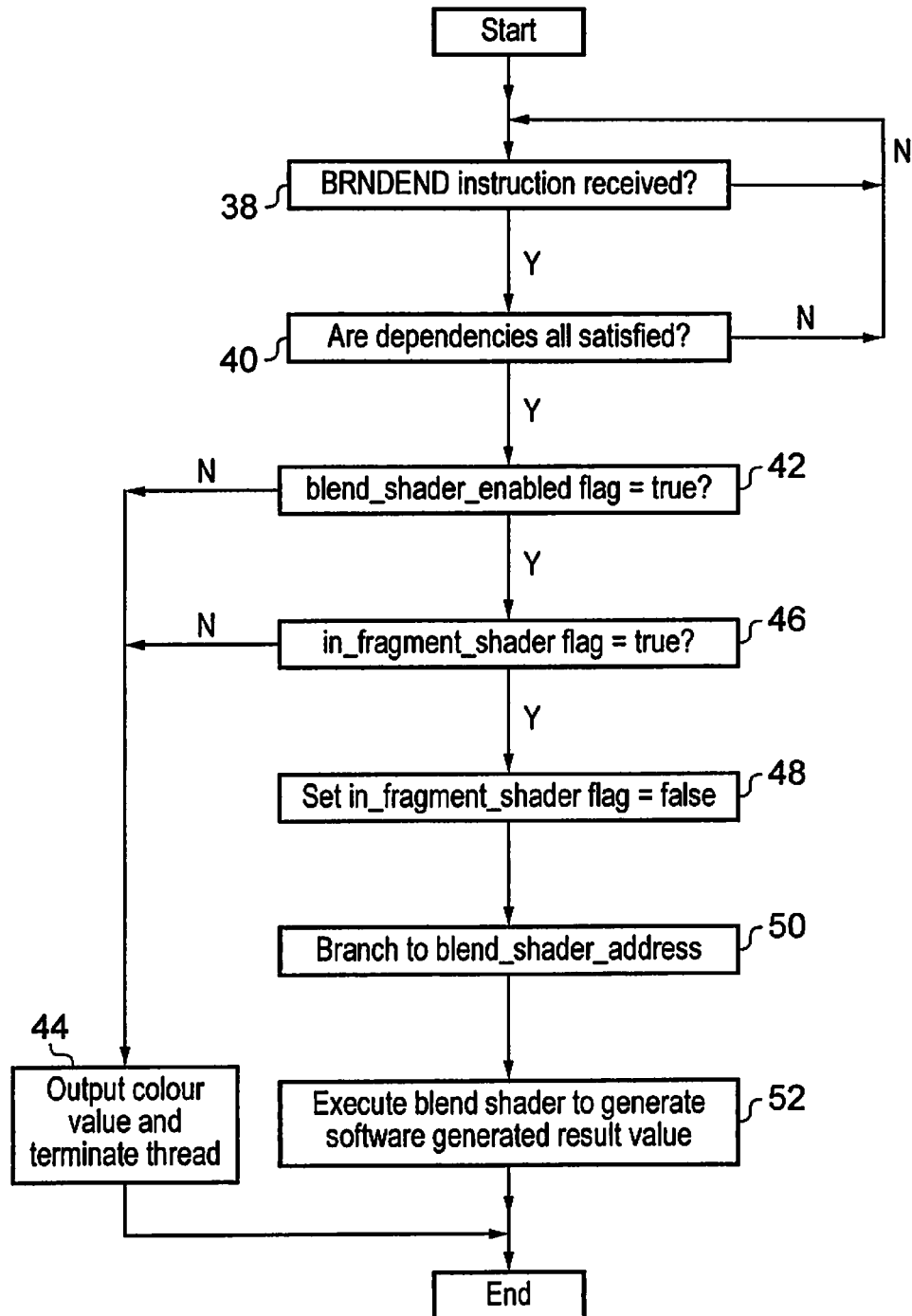


FIG. 4

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BRNDEND (target)
if (dependencies satisfied)
 if (blend_shader_enabled && in_fragment_shader)
 in_fragment_shader = false
 branch to blend_shader_address

 else
 output colour value
 terminate thread

else
 branch to target

FIG. 5

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SWITCHING BETWEEN DEDICATED FUNCTION HARDWARE AND USE OF A SOFTWARE ROUTINE TO GENERATE RESULT DATA

This application is a continuation of U.S. patent application Ser. No. 13/067,570, filed Jun. 9, 2011, pending, which claims priority of GB Application No. 1011419.7 filed Jul. 7, 2010, the entire contents of each of which are hereby incorporated by reference in this application.

BACKGROUND OF THE INVENTION

1. Field of the Invention

This invention relates to the field of data processing systems. More particularly, this invention relates to data processing systems including processing circuitry for executing program instructions together with dedicated function hardware coupled to the processing circuitry for performing a dedicated processing operation.

2. Description of the Prior Art

It is known to provide data processing systems which include both a general purpose processor for executing a stream of program instructions together with dedicated function hardware. The dedicated function hardware may, for example, be accelerator hardware designed and provided to perform specific processing functions, such as compression or decompression of large quantities of media data. Another example would be a general purpose processor which is provided with a coprocessor for performing certain operations. In this case, if the coprocessor is not present in an implementation, then software seeking to utilise that coprocessor will typically trigger an exception and cause the processing that was to be performed by the coprocessor (dedicated function hardware) to instead be performed by emulation software running on the general purpose processor. Thus, the use of the coprocessor is dependent upon whether or not the coprocessor is present.

SUMMARY OF THE INVENTION

Viewed from one aspect the present invention provides an apparatus for processing data comprising:

processing circuitry configured to perform data processing operations;

instruction decoder circuitry coupled to said processing circuitry and responsive to a stream of program instructions to generate control signals to control said processing circuitry to perform said data processing operations; and

dedicated function hardware coupled to said processing circuitry and configured to receive output data from said processing circuitry and to perform a dedicated processing operation upon said output data to generate hardware generated result data; wherein

said instruction decoder circuitry is responsive to an end instruction and a software processing flag to generate control signals to control said processing circuitry to end a current software routine, to generate said output data and:

(i) if said software processing flag has a first value, then to trigger said dedicated function hardware to receive said output data from said processing circuitry and to perform said dedicated processing operation to generate said hardware generated result data; or

(ii) if said software processing flag has a second value, then to trigger said processing circuitry to perform a further soft-

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ware routine upon said output data to generate software generated result data instead of said hardware generated result data.

The present techniques recognise that even in embodiments in which the dedicated function hardware is always provided, there may be circumstances in which it is desirable not to use that dedicated function hardware and instead use a software routine to perform some desired processing. Furthermore, the present technique seeks to provide a mechanism to permit such a switch to the use of a software routine instead of the dedicated function hardware with a low hardware and performance overhead associated with the control of the switching. The current software routine ends with an end instruction and the instruction decoder responsible for decoding that end instruction is modified to be responsive to a flag indicating that a software routine should be used to trigger execution of that software routine. Otherwise, the default behaviour will be to use the dedicated function hardware which is always present. In this way, additional flexibility may be achieved whereby processing with particular characteristics not readily provided by the dedicated function hardware may instead be performed by a software routine.

It will be appreciated that the processing circuitry could comprise a single processor responsive to a stream of program instructions. Alternatively, the processing circuitry may comprise a plurality of processors and the instruction decoder circuitry may comprise a plurality of instruction decoders with each processor being coupled to a corresponding instruction decoder. Each of these processor and instruction decoder combinations may then be responsive to their own stream of program instructions. This provides a parallel execution environment.

It is possible that the current software routine and the further software routine could be executed by different processors. However, it is convenient that a common processor executes the current software routine and then follows this with execution of the further software routine as this will avoid the overhead and complication of having to switch processors as well as ensuring that data generated by the current software routine is available for use by the further software routine.

The processing performed by the system may be multi-threaded. There may be multiple threads running on a single processor as well as multiple threads spread across multiple processors.

Whilst the present technique has a general applicability, it is well suited to use when the apparatus is dedicated graphics processing circuitry. Such dedicated graphics processing circuitry is typically highly computationally intensive with tasks that are broken down into multiple sections with some of these sections being well suited to being performed by dedicated function hardware whilst others are better performed by programmed general purpose processors.

Within this context of graphics processing circuitry, the current software routine may be a fragment shader generating output data which is a pixel colour value. In this case, the dedicated function hardware may be blend function hardware responsive to the output pixel colour value and at least a current pixel colour value stored within a frame buffer to generate a result pixel colour value to be stored within the frame buffer memory in place the current pixel colour value. Such fragment processing followed by blend processing is typical of a graphics processing environment. The present techniques facilitate that, if the blend function hardware which is provided is not able to provide desired processing characteristics, then the further software routine which may be triggered can be a blend shader which is responsive to the

output pixel colour value and at least a current pixel colour value currently stored within the frame buffer memory to generate a result pixel value to be stored in the frame buffer memory in place of the current pixel colour value.

The dedicated function hardware may be responsive to one or more configuration parameters to modify the dedicated processing operation performed by the dedicated function hardware. Thus, the dedicated function hardware is capable of some variation in the processing it performs, but is not as flexible as a general purpose processor executing a stream of program instructions, such as the further software routine.

The way in which the dedicated function hardware may be triggered to commence its dedicated processing operation is by the storing of the output data into a memory with such a store operation being detected in hardware and then triggering the operation of the dedicated processing hardware.

The end instruction which terminates the current software routine may also be used to terminate the further software routine. This is efficient from an instruction encoding point of view. In this circumstance, a routine flag may be provided to indicate whether the processing circuitry is currently executing the current software routine. Thus, if the routine flag does not indicate that the processing circuitry is executing the current software routine, then triggering of execution of the further software routine will be suppressed.

A programmable branch address may be stored as a configuration parameter specifying a start address of the further software routine.

The end instruction may be arranged such that it triggers a branch to a target address specified by the end instruction itself until one or more predetermined dependency conditions are satisfied. Thus, the commencement of processing by the dedicated function hardware, or the further software routine, may be gated upon the one or more predetermined dependency conditions by having the end instructions perform its branch functionality instead of triggering processing by the dedicated function hardware or by the further software routine.

Viewed from a further aspect the present invention provides an apparatus for processing data comprising:

processing means for performing data processing operations;

instruction decoding means for generating control signals to control said processing circuitry to perform said data processing operations in response to a stream of program instructions; and

dedicated function hardware means for receiving output data from said processing means and for performing a dedicated processing operation upon said output data to generate hardware generated result data; wherein

said instruction decoding means is responsive to an end instruction and a software processing flag to generate control signals to control said processing means to end a current software routine, to generate said output data and:

(i) if said software processing flag has a first value, then to trigger said dedicated function hardware means to receive said output data from said processing means and to perform said dedicated processing operation to generate said hardware generated result data; or

(ii) if said software processing flag has a second value, then to trigger said processing means to perform a further software routine upon said output data to generate software generated result data instead of said hardware generated result data.

Viewed from a further aspect the present invention provides a method of processing data comprising the steps of:

performing data processing operations using processing circuitry;

decoding a stream of program instructions to generate control signals to control said processing circuitry to perform said data processing operations; and

receiving output data from said processing circuitry and for performing a dedicated processing operation upon said output data to generate hardware generated result data using dedicated function hardware; wherein

said decoding steps is responsive to an end instruction and a software processing flag to generate control signals to control said processing means to end a current software routine, to generate said output data and:

(i) if said software processing flag has a first value, then to trigger said dedicated function hardware to receive said output data from said processing means and to perform said dedicated processing operation to generate said hardware generated result data; or

(ii) if said software processing flag has a second value, then to trigger said processing means to perform a further software routine upon said output data to generate software generated result data instead of said hardware generated result data.

The above, and other objects, features and advantages of this invention will be apparent from the following detailed description of illustrative embodiments which is to be read in connection with the accompanying drawings.

BRIEF DESCRIPTION OF THE DRAWINGS

FIG. 1 schematically illustrates a portion of a graphics processing system including both dedicated function hardware and a further software routine to be used in place of the dedicated function hardware;

FIG. 2 schematically illustrates a general purpose processor responsive to a stream of program instructions;

FIG. 3 schematically illustrates a graphics processing apparatus including an array of processors and a memory storing graphics context state and other data associated with the graphics processing;

FIG. 4 is a flow diagram schematically illustrating the operation of an instruction decoder upon decoding an end instruction; and

FIG. 5 is pseudo-code illustrating the functionality of an end instruction in accordance with one embodiment of the present techniques.

DESCRIPTION OF THE EMBODIMENTS

FIG. 1 schematically illustrates a graphics processing system 2. Rasterizer hardware 4 is responsible for reading graphics context state 6 specifying graphics primitives to be drawn (e.g. primitive triangles) and generating from these a stream of graphics fragments typically corresponding to a pixel to be drawn as part of the representation of the graphics primitive that has been rasterized. It will be appreciated that further graphics processing operations may be performed prior to the action of the rasterizer hardware 4, such as a spatial transformations, vertex and primitive sorting etc.

The rasterizer hardware 4 generates a stream of data identifying fragments (pixels) to be drawn. These are passed to fragment shader software 8 for a determination of the pixel colour value associated with each fragment. The fragment shader 8 is provided in the form of a software routine running on a general purpose processor of the graphics processing system 2. Typically, many general purpose processors will be provided in parallel within the graphics processing system so that multiple pixels may be processed in parallel and other processing operations performed in parallel.

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The fragment shader **8** (current software routine) finishes with an end instruction. This end instruction branches back to itself until predetermined dependency conditions are met. In this way, further processing of a pixel colour value generated by the fragment shader **8** may be delayed until the proper point in the processing sequence is reached (corresponding to all the dependencies being met) and the pixel colour value can be passed forward for blending.

The end instruction which is decoded by an instruction decoder within the general purpose processor which is executing the fragment shader. The instruction decoder executing produces control signals which control how the blend processing is performed. The graphics context state **6** associated with the processing of that pixel value (an individual processing thread) includes a `blend_shader_enabled` flag as well as an `in_fragment_shader` flag. If when the end instruction is decoded the `blend_shader_enabled` flag is true, then this indicates that the blend processing should be performed by a blend shader **10** (further software routine) rather than dedicated blend function hardware **12**. Both the dedicated blend function hardware **12** and the blend shader **10** are provided within the system. Thus, if the `blend_shader_enabled` flag is true then, the blend shader **10** will process the pixel colour value to perform the blend operation with a current pixel value at a corresponding position within a frame buffer memory **14** to produce a software generated result pixel colour value which is written back to the corresponding position within the frame buffer memory **14**. Alternatively, if the `blend_shader_enabled` flag is false, then the pixel colour value is processed by the dedicated blend function hardware **12** which is present by default to generate a hardware generated result pixel colour value which is again written to the frame buffer memory **14**. Thus, the same end instruction within the fragment shader **8** (current software routine) may be used to trigger either use of the dedicated blend function hardware **12** or the blend shader **10** (further software routine) in dependence upon the `blend_shader_enabled` flag.

A further feature is the use of the `in_fragment_shader` flag. This is provided as the same end instructions can be used to terminate both the fragment shader **8** and the blend shader **10**. When terminating the blend shader **10**, it is inappropriate to trigger processing of the output from the blend shader **10** by a further blend shader **10**. Thus, the end instruction will only invoke the blend shader **10** if the `in_fragment_shader` flag indicates that the general purpose processor was executing the fragment shader **8** when that end instruction was encountered and decoded.

FIG. 2 illustrates a general purpose processor **16** within a graphics processing unit of the type which may be used to execute the fragment shader **8** and/or the blend shader **10**. Program instructions constituting the fragment shader **8** or the blend shader **10** are supplied to an instruction pipeline **18**. An instruction decoder **20** is responsive to these program instructions to generate control signals **22** which control the processing operations performed by a data path **24** in processing data values stored within registers **26**. The instruction decoder **20** can also control the processor **16** to store data to a separate memory and to read data from that separate memory. The registers **26** are illustrated in banked form indicative of a multi-threading capability of the processor **16** being facilitated by the use of switching between different registers banks when switching between different threads of execution (different streams of program instructions).

FIG. 3 illustrates a graphics processing unit including an array **28** of the processor **16**. Such an array **28** facilitates highly parallel processing of a type well suited for graphics processing operations. A memory **30** stores the fragment

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shader program **32** and the blend shader program **34** which is executed by individual instances of the processor **16**. The memory **30** also includes the frame buffer **14** into which the result pixel colour values are assembled by the blend processing. The memory **30** further stores the graphics context state **6** together with a programmable branch target address **36** which indicates the start address of the blend shader program **34** which is to be executed when the end instruction triggers use of the further software routine (blend shader **10**).

FIG. 4 is a flow diagram schematically illustrating the decoding of an end instruction. The end instruction has the mnemonic `BRNDEND` (branch no dependencies end). Step **38** waits until the end instruction is received. When the end instruction is received, then step **40** determines whether or not all the dependencies associated with that processing thread (and thereby with the end instruction) have been satisfied. When all the dependencies are not satisfied, processing returns to step **38**.

When all of the dependencies are satisfied at step **40**, then processing proceeds to step **42** where a determination is made as to whether the `blend_shader_enabled` flag is true. If the `blend_shader_enabled` flag is false, then processing proceeds to step **44** where the colour pixel value from the fragment shader **8** is output (e.g. written to the memory **30**) and the fragment shader thread **8** for calculating that pixel colour value is terminated. The writing of the pixel colour value to the memory **30** triggers the dedicated blend function hardware **12** to read that pixel colour value from the memory **30** and commence its dedicated processing operation thereupon.

If the determination at step **42** is that the `blend_shader_enabled` flag is true, then processing proceeds to step **46** where a determination is made as to whether or not the `in_fragment_shader` flag is true. If the `in_fragment_shader` flag is false, then processing again proceeds to step **44**. In this case the colour pixel value will again be output and the thread will be terminated. However, as the thread terminated is not a fragment shader **8**, then it is inappropriate to invoke processing by the dedicated blend function hardware **12**. The location to which the colour pixel value is stored as well as other state data serves to indicate whether or not the dedicated blend function hardware **12** should be invoked upon output of the colour pixel value at step **44**.

If the determination at step **46** is that the `in_fragment_shader` flag is true, then processing proceeds to step **48** where the `in_fragment_shader` flag is set false. This is because the blend shader **10** is about to be invoked and accordingly the `infragment_shader` flag should indicate that the program instruction controlled processing that is about to take place is not fragment shader processing. Step **50** is a branch to a target address indicated by a `blend_shader_address` stored within the memory **30** and corresponding to a start address of the blend shader program **34**. Step **52** executes the blend shader **10** and generates a result pixel colour value which is again written to the frame buffer memory **14**.

FIG. 5 is pseudo code schematically illustrating the processing operations performed when an end-instruction **54** is decoded. These processing operations are as illustrated in FIG. 4.

Although illustrative embodiments of the invention have been described in detail herein with reference to the accompanying drawings, it is to be understood that the invention is not limited to those precise embodiments, and that various changes and modifications can be effected therein by one skilled in the art without departing from the scope and spirit of the invention as defined by the appended claims.

We claim:

1. A method of processing data comprising the steps of:
performing data processing operations using processing
circuitry;
decoding a stream of program instructions to generate con-
troll signals to control said processing circuitry to per-
form said data processing operations; and
receiving output data from said processing circuitry and for
performing a dedicated processing operation upon said
output data to generate hardware generated result data
using dedicated function hardware; wherein
said decoding step is responsive to an end instruction and a
software processing flag to generate control signals to
control said processing circuitry to end a current soft-
ware routine, to generate said output data and:
 - (i) if said software processing flag has a first value, then to
trigger said dedicated function hardware to receive said
output data from said processing circuitry and to per-
form said dedicated processing operation to generate
said hardware generated result data; or
 - (ii) if said software processing flag has a second value, then
to trigger said processing circuitry to perform a further
software routine upon said output data to generate soft-
ware generated result data instead of said hardware gen-
erated result data.
2. A method as claimed in claim 1, wherein said processing
circuitry comprises a plurality of processors, said decoding is
performed by a plurality of instruction decoders and each
processor of said plurality of processors is coupled to one of
said plurality of instruction decoders, said instruction
decoder being responsive to a stream of program instructions
to generate control signals to control said processor.
3. A method as claimed in claim 2, wherein said current
software routine and said further software routine are per-
formed by a common one of said plurality of processors.
4. A method as claimed in claim 2, wherein each of said
processors performs a plurality of threads of processing in
response to a plurality of streams of program instructions.

5. A method as claimed in claim 1, wherein said processing
circuitry performs a plurality of threads of processing in
response to a plurality of streams of program instructions.

6. A method as claimed in claim 1, wherein said method is
a dedicated graphics processing method.

7. A method as claimed in claim 6, wherein said current
software routine is a fragment shader and said output data is
an output pixel colour value.

8. A method as claimed in claim 7, wherein said dedicated
function hardware is blend function hardware responsive to
said output pixel colour value and at least a current pixel
colour value currently stored within a frame buffer memory to
generate a result pixel colour value to be stored in said frame
buffer memory in place of said current pixel colour value.

9. A method as claimed in claim 8, wherein said further
software routine is a blend shader responsive to said output
pixel colour value and at least a current pixel colour value
currently stored within a frame buffer memory to generate a
result pixel colour value to be stored in said frame buffer
memory in place of said current pixel colour value.

10. A method as claimed in claim 1, wherein said dedicated
function hardware is responsive to one or more configuration
parameters to modify said dedicated processing operation
performed by said dedicated function hardware.

11. A method as claimed in claim 1, wherein if said soft-
ware processing flag has said first value, then said end instruc-
tion triggers said processing circuitry to store said output data
to a memory thereby triggering said dedicated function hard-
ware to read said output data from said memory and perform
said dedicated processing operation.

12. A method as claimed in claim 1, wherein said instruc-
tion decoder is responsive to a programmable branch address
stored as a configuration parameter specifying a start address
of said further software routine.

13. A method as claimed in claim 1, wherein said end
instruction branches to a target address specified by said end
instruction until one or more predetermined dependency con-
ditions are satisfied.

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